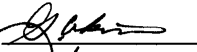


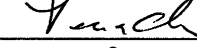
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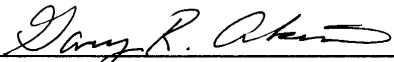
FILE TITLE: 1st Posthumous AF Cross Recipient - A1C William H. Pitsenbarger

Reviewed by:

AFEHRI Representative  date 14 Nov 97

EPC Representative  date 25 Nov 97

Scanner Operator  date 25 Nov 97

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PITSENBARGER, WILLIAM H.*

"A1C William H. Pitsenbarger distinguished himself by extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an opposing armed force near Cam My, Republic of Vietnam on 11 April 1966. On that date, Airman Pitsenbarger was a rescue and survival specialist aboard a helicopter engaged in the evacuation of American casualties in a dense jungle. With complete disregard for his personal safety, Airman Pitsenbarger voluntarily rode a rescue hoist more than one-hundred feet to the ground and organized and coordinated rescue efforts at the scene. During the rescue operation, he cared for and prepared the casualties for evacuation, and insured that the recovery operation continued in a smooth and orderly fashion. Following the recovery of the ninth casualty, the rescue aircraft hovering overhead was damaged and disabled by automatic weapon fire. The helicopter was forced to abandon recovery efforts to make an emergency landing at a nearby airstrip. Airman Pitsenbarger volunteered to remain on the ground and administer medical treatment to the wounded. Shortly after rescue efforts were interrupted, the area came under heavy sniper and mortar fire. Airman Pitsenbarger repeatedly exposed himself to intensive automatic fire while gathering rifles and ammunition from fallen comrades which he passed among the defenders. His bravery and determination in the face of overwhelming odds are in keeping with the highest standards of performance and traditions of the American fighting man under attack...."

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C O P Y

NEWS RELEASE

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE
DIRECTORATE OF INFORMATION, Headquarters Seventh Air Force
TAN SON NHUT AIR BASE, REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE Apr 66 082

AIR FORCE RESCUE MAN GIVEN
LIFE HELPING WOUNDED GIs

Bien Hoa — The Air Force in Viet Nam has lost one of its best liked para-rescue medics. A1C William H. Pitsenbarger, died during the evening of April 11 so that wounded soldiers might live.

Pitsenbarger—or Pits, as he was known by those he saved from jungle and minefield and beach and river — was killed by Viet Cong gun fire during a fierce jungle fight about 31 miles southeast of Bien Hoa. He was 21 years old.

He had voluntarily dropped from his rescue helicopter to help load wounded soldiers aboard a sling which would lift them into the hovering chopper.

Pits came from Piqua, a town of 20,000 in Miami County, Ohio. His parents, William and Irene Pitsenbarger, reside there at 626 Gordon St. Pits was what the Air Force calls a "First timer" — meaning he had served less than one four-year hitch. He came into the Air Force on the last day of 1962. He wasn't married. He was a Catholic.

Though young, Pits lived a life of adventure few but those in his trade can equal. Some of his fellow rescuers have been killed in Viet Nam. Volunteers fill the dangerous pararescue seats.

-MORE-

C O P Y

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In recognition to his bravery at the time a VC bullet took Pitsenberger's life was Army Sgt. Fred C. Navarre of Hutchinson, Kan. Navarre, a squad leader, was one of the wounded Pits was trying to save. Of Navarre's 10-man squad, only two survived.

From a hospital near the Binh Hoa air base, Navarre said his unit -- "C" Company, 2d Battalion, 16th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division -- was involved in a heavy fight with the VC, April 11. Snipers and artillery fire were all about, and there were many wounded.

Pits, who was off duty April 11,¹ volunteered to go to their rescue. He was assigned to a rescue helicopter, and HH-43 Huskie. You can see the same kind at U.S. Airfields. They are used to put out aircraft fires.

The jungle where Pits died was dense. It had what soldiers call a three-canopy cover -- three levels of tree heights. Some of the trees were 150 feet tall.

The Huskie pilot with whom Pits made his last flight was Capt. Harold D. Salem, 33, of Douglas, Ariz.

To get into position to pick up the wounded, Salem had to hover in a canal area with 100 foot trees below him and 150-foot trees towering on all sides -- some within five feet of his rotor blades.

Pits was aboard the Huskie when the crew made the first pickup and took the wounded to a field hospital at Binh Ba -- a plantation about two miles from the battlefield.

-MORE-

¹. Not correct- Pits was on regular crew duty on the 11th.

G O P I

Apr 66 CSM, page 3 of 6 pages

Coming back to the jungle, Pits was lowered on his copter's winch line to the jungle floor to treat the wounded and get them into a litter so they could be lifted to the helicopter and out of what Navarro called "terrible fire."

He was ordered Pits to drop into the jungle. Going into a battle zone, even leaving a helicopter at the time of a rescue attempt -- is voluntary for the para-rescue medics. Pits knew this. He knew what he was doing, what he would get into, but yet he went. He often said his first concern was for the wounded who needed him.

His drop from the helicopter placed him where the fighting became most fierce. As he treated some wounded men, he gave them ammunition taken from the men who could no longer use it. Earlier he had given his own pistol to a soldier so badly hurt he could not hold a rifle.

When he had done what he could for the wounded, Pits left the first group. Navarro didn't know what Pits did while he was away, but about 10 to 15 minutes later, the young paramedic returned to Navarro's side with 20 magazines of rifle ammunition.

He crouched among the wounded and used a rifle to pour out fire.

"Pits must have seen the VC's for he was the only one who was using semi-automatic fire. The rest of us were on full automatic, just spraying the bushes and trees hoping our fire would hit," Navarro said. The Kansas soldier said he saw VC snipers fall from trees after they were hit.

Fifteen minutes after returning to the wounded men Pits lay dead in the dark jungle.

SECRET

C O P Y

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The battle raged on. Above, rescue helicopters from Pitsenbarger's unit, Detachment 6 of the 38th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron, tried to descend. They were driven away by the heavy fire.

Darkness brought a halt to the firing and also brought, Navarro said, the VC women and children who infiltrated in the darkness to slit the throats of wounded soldiers and take away weapons and ammunition. The women and children carried dead VC away so the Americans would not know how many were killed.

"You have to understand about VC," Navarro explained. "The hard corps VC go into a South Vietnamese village and tell the people if they don't help the VC fight, the VC will destroy the village and kill all the women and children. Actually, the South Vietnamese civilians don't have any choice but to go along with the VC.

"Usually when you're attacked by North Vietnamese troops, you have the South or the local VC making the first part of the attack, and then the North Vietnamese come in."

Navarro heard the VC call in the darkness and was told later by an interpreter who was with him that the women and children had been through and had come within 30 yards of his position.

Navarro's unit called in artillery during the night to drive back the VC forces. Five or six rounds came in every 15 seconds from 8:30 that night until seven o'clock the next morning.

This is how ALC William M. Pitsenbarger died. A helicopter crew brought his body out of the jungle the next morning. While he lived, he lived a life of great adventure.

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C O P Y

Apr 66, page 5 of 6 pages

Pits came to Viet Nam August 6. He had completed Army Paratrooper training at Fort Benning, Ga., had gone to the U.S. Navy underwater swimmers school, the rescue and survival technicians medical course and the Air Force Combat Survival Course at Stend A.F.B. Nev. He trained to jump the jungle at Eglin A.F.B., Fla., went to the Tropical Survival School at Albrook, A.F.B., Panama Canal Zone, and attended the firefighters course for the HH-43 helicopter -- the last aircraft he was to ride while living.

Life in the military service was exciting, demanding and difficult for Pits, but it had its bright moments. He went to Perth, Australia, as a Para-rescue medic on Gemini and Mercury space probe recoveries. Last fall he was on the helicopter which took singer Mary Martin from the Tan Son Nhut air base to Bien Hoa.

According to his squadron mates, he really enjoyed flights carrying doctors to treat patients at a leper colony in VC-infested territory near Bien Hoa.

Pits made over 300 flights while in Viet Nam.

He was nominated for the Airman's Medal just two weeks ago when he dropped on a helicopter wench line into a mine field to rescue a Vietnamese soldier. The soldier had unknowingly entered the minefield while fighting a fire, and set off a mine which blew off part of his foot.

Pits was the type of man no one could dislike. "He probably had his faults, but no one working with him could say just what they were," says A1C Henry J. O'Hairne, 20, of Dublin, Ireland, a para-rescue medic who worked with the Chicom.

Maj. Maurice G. Kessler, 34, of Annapolis, Md., Pitsenberger's commander, called Pits, "one of a special breed. Alert and always ready to go on any mission. He was the cheerfultype and was always ther when needed."

-MORE-

C O P Y

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He was a definite morale booster to the rescue people."

Pits was also a tough competitor, according to Capt. Dale L. Potter, 31, of Joseph, Ore. Potter used to play handball with the youth.

"On the court," the captain said, "Pits was just as tough as he was on the job. You don't replace someone like Pits."

Col. Arthur Beall of Orlando, Fla., Air Force rescue chief in Viet Nam said Pitsenbarger displayed incredible bravery. He might have added that rescue crews are making a habit of displaying unusual courage while living up to their motto: "That Others Might Live."